DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 175 CS 205 590

AUTHOR Rothmel, Steven Zachary
TITLE Technical and Creative Writing: Common Process, Common Goals.
PUB DATE Mar 80
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (31st, Washington, DC, March 13-15, 1980). Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Career Education: Course Objectives: *Creative Writing: Higher Education: Interdisciplinary Approach: *Technical Writing: Writing Instruction: *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

Creative writing and technical communication are distinct yet similar forms of writing that require time, patience, and disciplined creativity to be effective. Other qualities shared by these two writing forms that should be emphasized in technical writing courses are: (1) effective information sharing, a process that depends on audience analysis, organization, word selection, and sentence structure: (2) lively prose, achieved through the use of coherence, clarity, naturalness, and creativity: (3) flexible style that adheres to the conventions of correct spelling and punctuation: (4) organizaton and logical development of ideas: and (5) precise language shaping. Readability should be the primary objective for both kinds of writing. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED188175

Steven Zachary Rothmel
Department of English
Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa 50011

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Steven Zachary Rothmel
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

TECHNICAL AND CREATIVE WRITING: COMMON PROCESS, COMMON GOALS

Before beginning to explore the seldom realized but definite affinities that exist between creative and technical writing, we first must understand the potential scope of the latter discipline. At most colleges and universities, the title "Technical Writing" identifies an increasingly popular course designed for juniors and seniors majoring in the physical, biological, and social sciences, engineering, and occassionally business. Although primarily a writing course, its unique, motivated clientele prevents this class from becoming a revamped, upper-division version of freshman composition or having a remedial focus. Technical writing's deserved popularity with both students and faculty in the technical disciplines stems from the rediscovery that without successful communication progress becomes difficult, if not impossible. Scientists and engineers, anyone whose professional advancement depends on his or her ability to present and to interpret factual information, need to express themselves coherently and effectively. This realization helps explain why many students now elect to take the course and why they also come with certain expectations.

These people expect and deserve a class designed to teach and to develop the skills necessary for fulfilling their future professional needs. Labeling this course "Technical Writing" oversimplifies a challenging area of study whose breadth and depth demand a more definitive title. Moreover, this inadvertent misnomer implies that the class

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 205 590

merely provides training in technic l writing, a specialized industrial skill required for preparing specifications, instructions, and promotional bulletins--all indispensable documents, but work seldom done by scientists or engineers. Limiting study to this speciality distorts the course's potential focus and denies its audience necessary comprehensive skills.

Perhaps calling this exacting discipline technical communication would help prevent any possible confusion and would more accurately reflect its inherent diversity. Like creative writing--I refer only to serious fiction, the short story or the novel that presents an incisive and meaningful picture of life while examining its morally trying complications-- technical communication--this includes correspondence, proposals, and reports--can also be a form of intellectual creativity, finely wrought, purposeful expression. Both disciplines concentrate on information sharing, a process whose effectiveness depends on the consideration given to audience analysis, organization, word selection, and sentence structure. Of course, the methods for presenting fiction and fact vary, but these distinct, yet similar forms of writing rely on the same underlying rhetorical principles for their success.

Coherence, clarity, and naturalness, hallmarks of all good writing, are never achieved through obediently following a prescribed formula. Ingenuity rather than conformity produces this vital combination. Bringing prose to life, always an arduous but rewarding task, requires forethought and creative revision. This enrichment enhances the imaginative work of the literary craftsman as well as the scientist's or engineer's factual writing.

Overlooking, or even minimizin , the importance of creativity when teaching technical communication reduces it to rote. Despite the craft's utilitarian purpose, its effectiveness depends on the disciplined application of imagination. Failure to perceive the inherent malleability in this form of writing, a serious oversight that undermines the course's intent, destroys its potential to be more than prosaic. In order to achieve this potential, the student must first see his work as the product of a creative process rather than a reflex action. This basic insight transforms the inexperienced, often recalcitrant writer into a nascent craftsman. Without this significant change, rhetorical growth cannot begin.

Recognizing the synergistic relationship that exists between reason and imagination reflects intellectual maturity, higher education's traditional and proper goal. No other course so vividly and so practically demonstrates the illuminating effects of this powerful combination. Successful technical communication demands disciplined creativity, as do all intellectual endeavors--a telling fact that can help shape a receptive attitude toward writing's constant exigencies. Karl Pearson in his timeless analysis of imagination's integral role in science observes that "all great scientists have, in a certain sense, been great artists; the man with no imagination may collect facts, but he cannot make great discoveries."[1] We should add the equally important corollary that without this faculty he would be unable to convey the significance of his discoveries.

Although Pearson limits his discussion to the physical and biological sciences, his observation applies to all fields. Gerald Luedtke,

a consultant in urban planning, reiterates the value of imagination when describing the planner as a creative artist who must develop his "own organization, focus, and style in a planning study while meeting the basic federal requirements."[2] This simultaneous call for individuality and conformity appears contradictory. However, it succinctly illustrates an especially prevalent dilemma faced in technical communication.

Success in this discipline requires adapting style, including organization, to content and to audience, a process of controlled innovation, while conforming to those universal conventions, correct spelling and proper punctuation--plus the specific project requirements. These multiple demands preclude spontaneity, but they do not exclude pleasing, distinctive expression. Achieving the latter poses the greatest difficulty for the inexperienced writer who only grudgingly relinquishes the comforting misconception that correct use of language is the same as effective use. This occurs when he realizes that style must be adapted to audience and content, dictating the conscious molding of language.

Before interest in technical communication's inherent creative possibilities can increase, the student must understand that without the ability to write clearly and effectively he risks having his professional work, a reflection of himself, dismissed as the product of carelessness or worse, incompetence. These embarrassing consequences provide a powerful impetus for mastering the discipline. But without an appropriate view of his task, the writer cannot succeed. He, like the literary craftsman, must design his work so that it appeals to the intended audience and creates the desired effect.

The writing of both the novelist and the engineer becomes more appealing and effective when they see their words, those indispensable strands that interweave to form a precise, informative message in technical communication and a vivid tapestry of life in fiction, as what Oliver Wendell Holmes calls "the skin of a living thought."[3] This embodiment, the initial step toward efficient expression, enriches the work. I am not suggesting, however, that technical communication and creative writing are merely transcriptions of the active mind or forms of thinking aloud. On the contrary, each demands the logical presentation of its facts and its fiction, an unnecessary chore when in communion with self, and the selection of words that concisely convey intent, a burden seldom experienced in normal speech.

The organizational difficulties frequently encountered when presenting thoughts or incidents in a logical and unified sequence stem from the fact that we usually do not think in this manner. Writing generates in the mind a continuous stream of idea fragments and both relevant and irrelevant information. Filtering and channeling this flow, prerequisites for any successful form of writing, require concentration. The Latin phrase "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" (after this, therefore in consequence of this), the basis for all coherent communication, defines the problem facing every writer. This expression of a cause and effect relationship has little validity in everyday life: events do randomly occur. But its presence in all serious fiction and technical communication prevents chaos.

Failure to implement this essential structural concept prevents the logical progression of ideas or the gradual revelation of theme

through plot--always disasterous flaws. Contiguity, nearness on the page, does not automatically guarantee the cohesiveness of thoughts or events: a linkage must either exist inherently or must be created. In writing, when what follows has no apparent relationship to what precedes, confusion results. Preventing this impediment to understanding requires forethought and conscientious revision. Grouping related ideas together in technical communication and showing how they stem from each other increase the ease with which we follow the thought flow and comprehend its charted course. This need for organization and elaboration, an essential combination in both fiction and factual writing, forces the writer to structure his thinking so that others will grasp his intent on first reading.

Although the skilled fiction writer does not resort to explicit elaboration, he, nevertheless, adheres to the same rhetorical principle. Serious fiction, unlike the scientist's or the engineer's writing, strives for implicitness rather than explicitness. The necessary elaboration takes a form that Henry James characterizes as showing rather than telling, an effort to dramatize instead of summarize. In this famous Jamesian precept, we can hear the echo of Aristotle's advice from the Rhetoric to describe or explain whenever possible rather than to label,[4] an excellent suggestion that applies to successful fiction and to successful technical communication.

The logical arrangement of thoughts or events provides the basis for the coherent sharing of factual and fictional information, but this alone does not assure effective communication. The latter also requires the conscious control of language. Of course, the scientist and the

engineer do not write imaginative literature, but they, like the literary craftsman, must also select and shape language so it appropriately conveys their message. Precision, clarity, and grace, qualities present in all good writing, develop only when these craftsmen realize that how they say something affects what they say. This subsequently influences the response to their work and ultimately the reaction to them.

Initially, concentrating on the selection of words and the structure of sentences seems odd to the student. He remembers the canard that facts speak for themselves, but forgets that data frequently need to be interpreted. By showing the inexperienced writer the importance of selecting the word that expresses his precise meaning, not one that merely comes close, and structuring each sentence--punctuation helps in this shaping, creating desired emphasis and nuances--so it clearly embodies his thought, we enable him to create a comprehensible and readable interpretation.

Readability, an aesthetic impossibility without coherence and clarity, but primarily the consequence of naturalness, a sonic quality derived from diction and syntax, should never be an ancillary concern: it must always be a primary objective. Although this attribute may pass undetected, its absence quickly becomes apparent. Despite technical communication's facutal orientation, it need not be mechanical or tedious. Without being superficial or sensational, the scientist and the engineer can make their work informative, interesting, and even enjoyable. In order to achieve these goals, each must follow Aristotle's dictate and "disquise his art and give the impression of speaking

naturally and not artificially."[5] Paradoxically, naturalness only results from the conscious manipulation of language.

The disciplines of creative writing and technical communication demand that the writer develop a sensitivity to the sound and the sense of words, and recognize language's pliability. Each concentrates on appealing to an audience while creating a desired impression. The fiction writer creates meaning out of his experiences and his insights: the scientist, or the engineer, creates meaning out of his professional knowledge and his collected facts. These craftsmen fit Einstein's profile of the skilled scientific researcher who "must collect the unordered facts available and make them coherent and understandable by creative thought."[6]

Without imagination effective creative writing and technical communication would be impossible. These distinct, yet similar forms of writing require time and patience, but success in either stems from disciplined creativity.

REFERENCES

1. Karl Pearson, The Grammar of Science (London: J. M. Dent & Sons LTD., 1937), 31.

2. Gerald Luedtke, "Why Should Master Plans Make Dull Reading?" Planning, March. 1978, p. 17.

3. Oliver Wendell Holmes "Town versus Eisner," in Modern Rhetoric, ed. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 397.

4. Aristotle, "On Prose Style," in The Problem of Style, ed. J. V. Cunningham (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1966), p. 77.

5. Ibid., p. 70.

6. Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, The Evolution of Physics (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942), p. 5.